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Songs of Passage and Sacrifice

Gabriella Ghermandi's Stories in Performance

LAURA DOLP AND EVELJN FERRARO ■

The space . . . of dreams . . . that most literal of texts that help experiencing beings fill up the gaps in presupposing a world.¹

—SPIVAK (2012B, p. 457)

Globalization makes us live on an island of language in an ocean of traces, with uncertain shores ever on the move.

—SPIVAK (2012A, p. 493)

In this time and on this page, Spivak's island seems an apt place to begin a discussion about storytelling, resistance, and belonging. This chapter documents a conversation originating from two disciplinary perspectives—literature (Ferraro) and music (Dolp). We explore how spoken-word performance in a global context can facilitate social empowerment, craft a cultural past, and invigorate political consciousness. Although our analytical strategies and some of our conclusions differ, we share the assertion that the notion of artistic citizenship as it is defined elsewhere in this collection is considerably complicated, and even requires redefinition, in the context of non-Western cultures. Our present subject is one such case. In the creative work of Gabriella Ghermandi, an author, musician, and performer of the spoken word with roots in the Horn of Africa and Italy, acts of storytelling and music making are synonymous with empowerment, the preservation of living memory, and exposure of political injustices. We are suspicious of the kinds of false assumptions that could accompany the concept of “artistic citizenship” and its framing of Ghermandi's work—a concept born out of anxieties related to the Western dichotomy between “intrinsic value”

or “art for art’s sake” and “extrinsic value” or “art for people’s and society’s sake.” To apply this concept without giving painstaking care to its meanings would be to easily colonize the very agent seeking decolonization. At the very least, the word *citizenship* in English is fraught with its own technical connotations. At both the technical and deeply symbolic level, Ghermandi’s artistic practice in Italy is informed by a legal context that does not grant citizenship to the children of foreign migrants until they are adults. For Ghermandi’s audience, *citizenship* certainly has other connotations, but its legal reality does not necessarily frame artistic practice such as hers, which is the sole focus of our present conversation. Our solution is to adopt the notion of artistic citizenship as a quality of belonging and a mechanism whereby artists reconfigure culture for the sake of communal interests in a global present. In that context, Ghermandi’s example provides a crucial and specific lesson on the agencies of art in the revision of an Italian-Ethiopian past, within an increasingly multiethnic Italian society.

Ghermandi was born in Addis Ababa in 1965 and moved to Italy when she was 14. As the child of an Italian father and a mixed-race Eritrean mother, Ghermandi’s multilingual stories and performances are inspired by both her personal experience and the communal struggles of 20th-century Afro-European politics. She has authored numerous short stories, the novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* [*Queen of Flowers and Pearls*] (2007; English trans. 2015), and a recording entitled “The Atse Tewodros Project” (2014) involving a collaboration between Ethiopian and Italian musicians.² She also performs her written texts. In these “reading performances” (*spettacoli di narrazione*), as she terms them (Ghermandi, 2014d), Ghermandi draws her own words off the page into oral stories with collaborative music.

Ghermandi’s work relates history from below, that is, from the perspective of ordinary individuals within society, and evidences a recurring interest in the relationship between memory and tradition. We look at how two of her performance works, “A Song for Mamma Heaven” (“Un canto per Mamma Heaven”) and “In the Shadow of the Shameless Branches Laden with Bright Red Flowers” (“All’ombra dei rami sfacciati carichi di fiori rosso vermiglio,” have contributed to this endeavor (Ghermandi, 2014a). In “Mamma Heaven,” Ghermandi historicizes the politics of literacy and power in Ethiopia since the 1970s. The story is set during the 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian war, and the character of Zellecke reminisces on the boundaries between an oral past and a literate present. The second character, Mamma Heaven, eventually comes to terms with the power of learning to write in the context of her own death in exile. In “The Shadow,” Ghermandi stresses the importance of civic involvement—individual and communal—in the organization and reconfiguration of social structures during the takeover of the Derg in 1974.³ The young female narrator learns to ride a bicycle, and this new mobility allows her to test the boundaries of gender and communal activities. The elder Grandma Berechti ruthlessly critiques modern life and its mass communications.

Ghermandi’s songs speak powerfully to the generation who fought against the Italian army, and who largely believe that the suffering of the Ethiopian people

then, and also under the communist Derg, has been largely lost. She has related that she was requested by these veterans to sing their stories, in the form of an appeal: “daughter, no one remembers our sacrifice”⁴ (as cited in Boccitto, 2014). In this sense, her music and storytelling are a form of activism that consciously utilizes the emotional components of sound and her words to relate a historical narrative that cultivates audience empathy. In her performances that draw from material that is originally included in her novel *Queen of Flowers*, Ghermandi considers her songs to be the voices of the people. Her collaborations with Ethiopian and Italian musicians in “Tewodros” revisit and reinterpret songs of political resistance through a synthesis of jazz and traditional Ethiopian music (Lorrai, 2014; Santi, 2013). This project continues her lifelong artistic practice of combining music and the written word to expose and interrogate the past (“freedom . . . what is its cost, what else can replace it/why do we so love this migration that strips us of respect?”) and lament its heroes (“I will risk having my blood flow from my body like a sea”; Ghermandi, 2013). It is also her first published work in Oromo, Wolaytta, Tigrinya, Silt’e, and Amharic—the indigenous languages of Ethiopia—rather than Italian.

Over the years Ghermandi’s work has aspired to a more nuanced historical model and embraced the pluralism of a globalized environment. Her narratives complicate the traditionally polarized views of Italian colonialism in Africa. These traditional views have focused on either the physical and cultural atrocities that the Italians committed or a framing of the Italians as *brava gente*, who contributed vital infrastructure.⁵ As a performance event, “Tewodros” confronts the atrocities of the Italian invasion by bringing together musicians from Italy and Ethiopia. The collective music making of “Tewodros” serves as a poetic public forum for the collective trauma of the invasion and its historical precedents. It identifies the nature of that suffering and describes its significance, and by implication asserts issues of responsibility and social change. Because the project uses memory as a site of contention in which Italians and Ethiopians develop social meanings, it rehearses dynamics of power (Cizmic, 2012, p. 16). These engagements with the dynamics of power, resistance, and subalternity have shaped Ghermandi’s diasporic identity as a musician and author. We propose that music has a special place in this story, that it has multiple social and cultural resonances and serves as an access point to subaltern experience, as well as providing a site of resistance where a contrapuntal reading of hegemonic narratives is possible. In other words, Ghermandi’s performances raise provocative questions about her place in an entirely new global context, which has been generated from a diasporic experience and is considerably more fluid than a unidirectional migratory pattern between Ethiopia and Italy (Ramnarine, 2007, p. 2).

In this chapter, the concepts of “performance” and “music” are utilized in the broadest sense to accommodate different disciplinary approaches. From the perspective of language and cultural studies, Clò (2009) has described the crucial role of an audience in Ghermandi’s performed stories, stating that through “mutual empathy and embodied behavior” the unspeakable could be spoken, and her message of “hope and strength” could be delivered in a nonjudgmental

public space⁶ (p. 147). More specifically, in our analysis of Ghermandi's performances as *sounded* events where admittedly the text may be given more critical attention, it is not our intention to equate music with language, nor to subjugate it. Music requires its own modes of inquiry. While it may be true that arguments about music and culture can sometimes be ill-equipped to deal with music's negations—the ways that musical experiences can seem to reject specific historical and political location (Currie, 2012)—we agree with Middleton (2012) that “the idea that what is special about music as a cultural practice is just what other discourses cannot capture . . . [and] this realm may be the key to what music brings to culture” (p. 13). Just as performance of a musical score raises provocative theoretical issues about the relationship between its written form and its realization, so, too, does Ghermandi's habit of realizing her own literary texts in performance challenge us to understand how acts of musical embodiment, drawn from the written page, change the nature of her poetic public forum (see also, Agawu, 2003).

Finally, it is our hope that the conversation in this chapter provokes continued study of Ghermandi's work and its meanings. We grapple with, but cannot resolve, the ways that her music has been received by her various audiences and how qualities of courage and sacrifice translate from text to performance. We encourage you, the reader, to consider further how her performances serve as an agent of chronicling and self-imagining or suggest earlier literary and oral practices. More in-depth considerations need to be made about whose conflict her performances rehearse, and how⁷ (Reid, 2006, p. 93).

WRITING AND PERFORMING HISTORY FROM BELOW

EF (Eveljn Ferraro): The stories of the Ethiopian people are the pulsing heart of Gabriella Ghermandi's narratives. I interpret her commitment to songs, which she identifies as the voices of the people, as an attempt to rescue those voices “from the enormous condescension of posterity,” to use Thompson's (1963, p. 12) classic formulation of history from below. In other words, she dismantles patronizing views of the Ethiopian people by empowering their stories. Far from being disconnected from officially recorded historical events, these stories tell us how individuals and communities have met the sweeping changes that an ancient country like Ethiopia has experienced from the 1930s onward. Italian colonialism and internal resistance, and the 17-year-long dictatorship of the Derg, constitute the backdrop to many of her stories. As a storyteller, Ghermandi provides her audience with detailed descriptions of the precarious living conditions of families and neighborhoods at critical times of war, resistance, and change. Despite the political and social limitations imposed on people in their ordinary existence, Ghermandi's characters are often resourceful and tactical in surviving conditions of oppression, with the support of strong networks of relatives and helpers. In her narratives, the spaces that are sheltered from close surveillance, or that can be reimagined, become transformative spaces for local individuals and communities,

and sites of active resistance. For instance, in “The Shadow,” the young female narrator characterizes the beginning of the Derg government as fraught with uncertainty and danger, but the main point of her story is that she learns to ride a bike because the regime imports bicycles from Mao’s China while banning the goods of capitalist pro-American countries. Moving from Addis Ababa to the small town of Nazareth, she shrewdly creates for herself invisible margins of freedom in the folds and crevices of the regime. She rents a bike every day from a shop stocked with men’s bicycles, until the shopkeeper teaches her how to ride it. Her ambitions draw attention in the local community, especially among the waiters of the Warush hotel who serve the narrator’s family, and the passersby who are surprised to see a girl pursue an activity that is considered only for boys. Gradually, she masters the physical balance required and confidently rides the uneven roads of Nazareth. The admiring waiters appoint her the *telalaki* (errand boy) for the hotel. In this manner, through collective support and recognition, the girl successfully crosses territorial and gender-based boundaries.

I find that Ghermandi’s stories often place emphasis on human agency, understood as the conscious effort to act in the world. She claims that when we think of history in its singularity, we forget that we contribute to it continuously with small and big acts; hence, Ghermandi states that her project is “to let emerge the chorality of stories that can illustrate a perspective that is simultaneously global, local, singular, and plural” (as cited in Sossi, 2008). This choral model of history molds Ghermandi’s texts. For instance, the opening lines of “The Shadow” assert: “We are stories/of stories in history/Corners or centres/of the warp and the woof/of the fabric of the world./Tucks made in/the weave of events. We are the story.”⁸ In the weave of events, nothing—positive or catastrophic—is completely lost or kept, people continue to reshape their lives, and their stories intersect other stories on unexpected trajectories.

In “Mamma Heaven,” Ghermandi interrogates the repercussions of the Ethiopian–Eritrean war for a local community in Keren (Eritrea), where men are called to fight for one front or the other, mothers work outside the home to support their families, and children are looked after by other women in the neighborhood. Such is the role of Mamma Heaven. With 17 children in tow, she attends mandatory evening school and learns how to read and write. The process of learning to sign her name is the focal point of the short story and the symbol of her agency. Thanks to her new skill, she obtains monthly provisions of rice, flour, oil, and soap for all the children, as well as permission to pass military checkpoints and take them to Asmara when Keren is under fire. Her signature literally saves lives. Mamma Heaven’s experience highlights a broader collective history.

The concentric narratives in *Queen of Flowers* at once “reconstruct” and “deconstruct” history from the subjective viewpoints of individuals who are “protagonists of their own destiny and of the Story that they have contributed to create” (Lombardi-Diop, 2011, p. 309). From this perspective, I believe that Ghermandi’s “Tewodros” also represents a coherent development of history from below, beginning with the title of the project, which is named after the first Ethiopian emperor who was invested with power by the people rather than being

born into an imperial family. “Tewodros” is, however, not without its paradoxes, and we return to this issue shortly.

LD (Laura Dolp): There is evidence to suggest that the relationship between Ghermandi’s stories in their written form and their performances is influenced, in part, by Ghermandi’s search for integration in her own identity. In the narrative trajectory of the novel *Queen of Flowers*, the young female protagonist, Mahlet, inherits an oral tradition and eventually codifies that tradition by writing stories down. Even though *Queen of Flowers* is a work of fiction, in many ways the journeys of its characters mirror aspects of Ghermandi’s own life. It has, at the very least, personal connections to the effects of colonialism on her own family⁹ (Ghermandi, 2014d; also personal communication, September 23, 2014). Ghermandi endeavors to “speak” the “unspoken” Ethiopian past in the novel, as well as in “Mamma Heaven” and “The Shadow,” but in the language and modality of a colonial culture that made that past mute.

Ghermandi’s Italian has its own set of linguistic characteristics and is thus empowered in its ability to recover and interpret, but her performances are also crucial in the re-evaluation of these stories as written forms. In her summary of the increasingly critical and inclusive discourse about performance, Taylor (2007) observes that new understandings of embodied practice challenge imperialist methodologies that assume that writing serves as a predominant form of cultural transmission (p. 21). My sense is that Ghermandi’s spirited embodiment of her own written texts could be interpreted as “orature,” where vocality is central to its form¹⁰ (Ngũgĩ, 1986). This orature is composite, multivoiced, multimodal, ambiguous, dynamic, multidimensional, and situationally formulated (Finnegan, 2007, p. 199).

More specifically, in the performances of “Mamma Heaven” and “The Shadow,” Ghermandi and her collaborator, the guitarist Alessandro Sorrentino, realize the stories through textual and musical improvisation. Sorrentino, a largely self-taught musician and composer, has a special interest in the oral traditions of Puglia, Basilicata, Campania, and Emilia Romagna and their collaborative potential.¹¹ Like Ghermandi, his work stems from the grassroots practices of popular song, displays an avid interest in ethnography, and is often improvisatory¹² (Sorrentino, 2014). Ghermandi makes the stories available as live shows and also excerpts them as studio-recorded clips posted to her website. The live performances of “Mamma Heaven” include extra-musical events that integrate and acculturate her listeners. For example, when the story reaches its apex and Mamma Heaven learns to write her name, traditional Ethiopian bread is shared with the audience. In some cases, spiced tea is also served (Ghermandi, 2014b). In other words, as a work of live theater, “Mamma Heaven” breaks the fourth wall and displays key characteristics of contemporary storytelling (Wilson, 2006). In the recorded performance of “Mamma Heaven,” Ghermandi improvises on her text, often expanding it by repeating words and phrases for rhetorical emphasis (“like the sand of Keren, *that sand*” [my emphasis])¹³ or pruning and rearranging phrases in the manner of direct speech, such as the moment when Ghermandi mimics the urgent call of a political demonstration on the streets in Addis Ababa:

[print] For the sake of people and for their cultural growth. Long live the “people’s government.”

[performed] For the people’s cultural growth [!]. Long live the people’s government [!].¹⁴

The award-winning Pakistani author and storyteller Rukhsana Kahn (2014) has described a similar process of moving between modalities of print and performance, where, to

realize an oral story in a written format, you almost need to forget the way you “told” it and write it the way it would read well. And when taking a written story to the oral, you need to forget the way you wrote it and concentrate on the major ideas you need to get across using whatever words come to mind.

The performance of “Mamma Heaven” is richly textured through sound, verbal intonation, and timing. In the street call, Ghermandi capitalizes on its dramatic potential by raising her voice to cut through the imaginary din and moving seamlessly between Amharic and Italian:

[performed & print] *Awagi! Awagi ie debelo kedagi*: inizia la scuola pubblica [!]. La scuola per tutti [!]. (Ghermandi, 2014b)

Announcement! Announcement! As it is written!: Public school begins [!]
School for everyone [!].¹⁵

Her act of embodiment invests the story with emotional authenticity and is driven by a methodology that suggests the words performed—even words potentially incomprehensible for some of her listeners—are powerfully legible beyond their conceptual associations. This requires a form of complicity between performer and audience: an engagement with the more broadly understood signs of tone, where Ghermandi can shift the meanings of Mamma Heaven’s response from a simple declaration, “[print] Sì! Certo!” (Yes! Sure!), to one laden with the skepticism developed from surviving a life of contradictions.

In Sorrentino’s collaborative role as a musician, his musical vocabulary is both illustrative—his percussive response to the chaos of crowd (“baccano”)—and capable of expanding on the narrative, as a parenthetical story within a story. As Ghermandi enacts the raucous street caller, Sorrentino quietly repeats and then elaborates on one pitch, eventually continuing with a broken chordal accompaniment in a musical counterpoint that underpins but remains disengaged from the heightened drama of the narrative. It isn’t until Mamma Heaven speaks that the text and music become more homogenous in their affect. In this sense, Sorrentino “reads” against the grain of Ghermandi’s voice and suggests an affective underpinning not evident in the original text (Barthes, 1977).

Ghermandi views herself as part of a larger movement to “recover the art of orality” and her own desire to share the excitement of storytelling, in particular

its malleability and the close connection between storyteller and audience which in every performance, in her words, form a “single [unique] heart”¹⁶ (Ghermandi, 2004e). On other occasions she has emphasized how storytelling creates an intimacy between strangers and allows the audience and the storyteller to viscerally share the same emotions. In this sense, it is a form of profound sharing (Ghermandi, personal communication, September 23, 2014). Furthermore, Ghermandi draws a direct relationship between music making, the expression of a communal spirit, and its potential for multifaceted commentary: “The song that accompanies the narrative represents the love that I have for Ethiopian culture, for its intrinsic spirituality. . . . [It is] never empty of meaning.” It provides “double meaning to everything” and is always “the voice of the people” (Ghermandi, 2004e).

EF: The close connection between storyteller and audience that Ghermandi values so highly leads me to consider the significance of her art, and the prominence of Ethiopian voices within it, in the present Italian context. Why is it important to establish intimacy while exploring the dynamics of colonialism? And what can this mean in 21st-century Italy? Ghermandi has addressed this point by stating that she is not interested in conflict per se or in pointing her finger at Italians, because this would not be constructive. Instead, in her view, emotions are the shared ground where women and men can “feel” the lives, sacrifices, hopes, and desires of the colonized and hence develop a more complex view of colonialism than the one inspired by the *Italiani brava gente* refrain (Ghermandi, as cited in Sossi, 2008). Her method echoes what Indian historian Guha (1987) has described as “bending closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time” (p. 138). In this sense, Ghermandi offers to the audience the fine detail of social existence not fully articulated by Italian historical scholarship on colonialism until the 1990s.¹⁷ The plurality of stories, voices, and languages in her works functions as an antidote to the silencing of colonial memory, and as a transgressive principle insofar as that plurality interrogates and expands the boundaries of the colonial archive. In “Zones of Silence: Orality, Archives and Resistance,” Highmore (2006) has asserted that the archive, “an instrument of government and an instrument of governance” (p. 85), is an “entropic system” whose order is more fragile than it would seem, “and while it exerts orchestrating forces its fissures begin to show when it is ‘worked on’” (p. 93). It is in these expanding fissures that I envision the far-ranging questions about plural identities, Italianness inside and outside of Italy, past and present, that Ghermandi and many other artists with roots in former colonies and other regions of the world are forcefully bringing to the fore in contemporary Italy. Since the early 1990s, the emergence of an “italophone literature,”¹⁸ written in Italian by first-generation and second-generation immigrants, has prompted a reassessment of Italian national history and identity, and of the boundaries of Italian culture and literature through explorations of colonialism, hybridity, and multiethnicity that characterize the specific nature of postcolonial Italy (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012).¹⁹ If this points to the possibility of “a different architectonics of the archive” that might allow “to make culture hospitable

to the voices that inhabit it" (Highmore, 2006, p. 93), it is undeniable that there is still much to be done to reverse cultural habits. To our question on the challenges of migrant artists in Italy today, Ghermandi has answered:

For years we've been trying to highlight the cultural contributions of migrants to Italy. Unfortunately, however, this is possible to the extent that the country is willing to enter an equal relationship rather than persisting in the usual view of subalternity. As long as a certain image of Africa is singled out, how can we explain to people that yes, Africa is a continent where people starve to death, children die, we kill each other like gnats, there is no schooling etc . . . and then tell them that we bring culture! It's difficult to feed an idea for decades and then expect people to be willing to think the opposite.²⁰ (G. Ghermandi, personal communication, September 23, 2014)

Operating within a country full of contradictions such as Italy, Ghermandi's words point to the absence of a postcolonial consciousness in the general population, which represents a fundamental obstacle to the acknowledgment of migrants' cultural contributions. Her statement suggests that we can address the question of artistic citizenship from two angles. On the one hand, her call for an "equal relationship" between migrants and nonmigrants reminds us that the agency of art in promoting civic awareness and transformation is interdependent with a host of other sources (e.g., TV and newspapers) and institutions that inculcate ideas. The dissemination of new ideas reflecting a more equal rapport between cultures is inevitably a lengthy process in a country that discriminates in many forms against migrants. On the other hand, Ghermandi's answer subverts the notion of artistic citizenship embedded in the conceit "art for people's and society's sake." That is, if we demand social engagement from artwork and artists, what civic and cultural rights do we attribute to artistic citizenship? And how is this question problematized by issues of national and/or cultural belonging, foreignness, and transnational identity?

LD: It seems to me that Ghermandi's practice of weaving small stories into a pluralistic and humanistic history takes a new turn with "Tewodros." Her methodology is entangled from the onset by historical references, since the question of how singular military heroes might participate in a "people's history" is fraught with contradiction. It is true that the project's namesake, Emperor Tewodros II of Abyssinia (1820–1868), was by all accounts a driven and charismatic leader who came from humble beginnings and rose to power by any means necessary. His pioneering political aspirations for a unified and autonomous Ethiopian state extended to both administration and religion, and he once wrote to a French consul: "We, too, are Christians from the beginning of time. We do not need anybody to teach us Christianity" (Rubenson, 1994, p. 9). But his dramatic rise also included the trappings of an ambitious ideologue, in that he considered himself the Elect of God, and later, to legitimize his reign, he added "son of David and Solomon" to his title to emphasize this Solomonic connection and lineage²¹ (Crummey, 1998). In the face of documentary evidence compiled by European

scholars, Tewodros was the kind of sovereign that historian Harold Marcus has described as “brutal, unrealistic, and impolitic” (Marcus, 1997, p. 203). But almost 200 years after Tewodros’s birth and in a post-Soviet Mengistu era, he is touted as the hero of Ethiopia and singularly responsible for modernizing the state²² (Marsden, 2007).

Ghermandi’s explicit references to him in the songs “Atse Tewodros (Part 1 and 2)” appeal to his human sacrifice as a political leader: “I will risk having my bones be shattered/I will risk having my blood flow from my body like the sea”; his devotion to the cause: “I am willing to lose my life rather than yield an inch of my country’s independence”; and his mistrust of foreign interests: “I will fight those who have come cloaking their intentions in the Gospel, to subjugate our land” (Ghermandi, 2013). On a personal level, the song’s moral message is transmitted through a physical metaphor of grassroots labor: One day you lose; one day you gain. To make this happen, your neck must be lowered to the ground. The day passes. When you lower yourself and work hard, your neck is twisted to the other side.²³ In this sense, Ghermandi aligns herself with the subaltern experience of time mentioned earlier (Guha, 1987).

But the visceral nature of her lyrics also points to Tewodros’s historical and defiant suicide, which has contributed to his ethos as a national icon. His cult-like status within Ethiopia in the new millennium is also the result of a legacy of national defensiveness against severely critical foreign commentary. In Ghermandi’s explanation of Tewodros as a historical symbol of her collaboration between Italian and Ethiopian musicians, she describes the project’s namesake as “one of the most beloved” emperors in Ethiopian history and a leader who acquired his power not from heredity but from “perseverance and charisma, qualities that charmed the Ethiopian people to the point that they broke with centuries-old tradition and supported his ascension to the throne” (Ghermandi, 2014c). Her text highlights his commitment to the modernization of Ethiopia and his tenacious fight against colonial aggression. It also characterizes Tewodros as both an agent of change and someone who respected tradition²⁴ (Ghermandi, 2014c). If Ghermandi’s personal perspective on Tewodros acknowledges something other than his origins and his aspiration, such as his means, she does not address it in her songs and stories. This selectivity is not without context, in that a figure like Tewodros belongs to a long legacy of rulers whose violent actions were justified by the noble ideals of defending the region of modern-day Ethiopia. In the 18th and 19th centuries, this meant Muslim and pagan interests; in the 20th, this included the defense of Tigrayan and Eritrean interests through conflict and sacrifice (Reid, 2006, pp. 93–99).

MEMORY AND TRADITION

EF: Ghermandi’s artistic endeavor, in its multifaceted actualization, makes more explicit the history and culture of Ethiopia to Italy and the world. Her

engagement with cultural memory is personal, in that her Italian father arrived in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation and her mother endured that same occupation as a member of the occupied community. Ghermandi has referred to the uneasiness of such a complex legacy in terms of historical and personal wound (“una ferita”), an inner conflict (“stato di guerra interiore”) that has pervaded her life for a long time (as cited in Boccitto, 2014), exacerbated by the general oblivion of the colonial enterprise that she has witnessed in Italy and that was initially mirrored in the misreadings of her mixed identity.²⁵ The urge to uncover the historical memory of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia has obsessively shaped her individual quest and her writing and oral narratives. She has arrived at a new sense of reconciliation during her first performance in Addis Ababa with the Ethiopian and Italian artists of “Tewodros,” who reinterpret the songs of those who have courageously sacrificed their lives for Ethiopia’s freedom (Boccitto, 2014). Ghermandi’s acknowledgment that this musical *métissage* project has enabled her to fully embrace her plural identity suggests that the collective public performance of historical memory is a powerful means to confront private and historically situated conflicts.²⁶ I view the exploration of conflict as central to Ghermandi’s engagement with cultural memory throughout her production. Her usage of orality, literacy, and singing advances around the concept of conflict and its symbols and manifestations, primarily in the contexts of Italian colonialism and the rise and fall of the Derg dictatorship in Ethiopia.²⁷ She fulfills the role of a modern storyteller who recounts the past by delving into and reinventing the rich tradition of the *azmāri*—Ethiopia’s poet-musician. This includes their songs of resistance and the polysemous tapestry of the Amharic language. In particular, Ghermandi employs the *qene*, a poetic style known as “wax and gold” (*sem-enna warq*) that constructs a double meaning in the text. The technique involves two semantic layers: The apparent meaning, on the surface, is known as *sem*/wax, while the underlying true and, at times, spiritual meaning is known as *warq*/gold (Levine, 1972, p. 5). This practice values the sophistication of language and the creation of puns, often employed by the *azmāri* with political purposes and with a subtle irreverent tone. Furthermore, the wax and gold model is conceived as a distinctive component of “Ethiopianness” among the African nations (Bekerie, 1997, p. 3).

Ghermandi often experiments with the visible and invisible meanings embedded in words and images. Such operations consistently reveal a link between the past and the way forward. For example, an explicit reference to *qene* is in the narrative development of *Queens of Flowers*, when the old hermit Abba Chereka tries to help Mahlet recall the promise that she had made to Yacob as a child: “My dear, your name is almost a *qene*. If you take the ‘h’ out and slightly change the accent, Mahlet stands for ‘meaning’ and Ma’let stands for ‘that time,’ thus ‘the meaning of that time’” (Ghermandi, 2011, pp. 148–149). In this scene, the “meaning of that time” coincides with Mahlet’s promise of writing and disseminating the story of Italian colonialism and of the struggle of her people, which are two sides of the same coin. “And this is why today I tell you his [of Yacob]

story, which is also mine. But also yours,” states Mahlet at the end of the novel, reconnecting it circularly to its beginning (Ghermandi, 2011, pp. 148–149).

The wax and gold of *qene* technique are usually combined in complex castings that contain multiple and simultaneous historical and cultural references. The role of grandmother Berechti in “The Shadow” illustrates a peculiar way in which Ghermandi applies the metaphorical qualities of *qene* to talk directly about Ethiopia and indirectly about Italy. The story introduces the changes that the Communist regime of Mengistu forced into the life of an ordinary family in the 1970s. The anticapitalist “people’s government” replaces American telefilms with other forms of entertainment on TV: “gymnastics, piano concerts, military parades and political propaganda” (Ghermandi, as cited in Clò, 2009, p. 149). Contrary to the general disappointment of the family members, the grandmother defiantly maintains that the genuinely beautiful stories are those exchanged among people, rather than those stories imposed by “the box” (that is what she calls the TV):

Huh! TV! It always belongs to the regime, conceived and created to make you stupid! However I put it you still don’t believe me but that’s the way it is. Before there were only American programs, now they’re all Russian. Huh! It’s all controlled by the regime. . . . Believe me children, leave the box alone, it’s far better to sit here all together and tell stories. (Ghermandi, as cited in Clò, 2009, p. 149)

The grandmother is an advocate of storytelling as a method of building knowledge across generations through sharing and interrogating the past. Albeit couched in the context of the 1970s, her warning against the mesmerizing and controlling power of “the box” seems to mirror the concern that Ghermandi has voiced in an interview (as cited in Comberiati, 2011, p. 152) about the loss of cultural roots and family values brought about by the modernization of Ethiopia, especially in the urban context of Addis Ababa.

Invisible in the story but even more urgent is the link between the character’s viewpoint and the “degeneration and progressive cultural emptiness of Italian television” that Ghermandi has clearly identified, on her website, as one of the inspiring motives of her narrative.²⁸ The author explicitly refers to the metaphorical style typical of the Ethiopian culture as a tool that she uses to bridge distant times and geographies to elicit a reflection on the role of media in contemporary Italy.

Ghermandi’s use of layered language also informs her description of “Tewodros” as a creative endeavor. She compares the presence of the Italian musicians to “a beautiful lodge in the forest. It’s there but must not be visible.”²⁹ The Italian practice must remain hidden in the forest of the Ethiopian musical tradition. This metaphorical image creates a decentered history of power relationships where the subaltern site of resistance par excellence—the highlands, where the Ethiopian partisans (*arbegnoch*) hid themselves during the Italian occupation—is reimaged as a forest of engaging sounds and instruments meant to be seen and heard without fear. Compared to the previous projects, in which Ghermandi

has collected private stories and sewn them together in writing and oral performances, in this latest endeavor, the shared past is performed collaboratively by individual artists of diverse origins. The concept of the “beautiful lodge in the forest” that must remain in the background stresses the type of relationality that the project involves. This relationality includes subjects that represent a story and a cultural tradition, and who all partake of a broader history that still needs to be publically sung. In addition, this makes space for a history that is acknowledged for its violence and for its transnational resonance that questions race, gender, and nation building.

LD: The tradition of the *azmāri* is crucial for Ghermandi, in a variety of ways beyond her use of the *gene* technique. In *Queen of Flowers*, for example, her characters of Mahlet, Aron, and Yacob are drawn in relation to a rich legacy of *azmāri* cultural practices. The *azmariwoch* have played an active role in Ethiopian culture since well before the Christian era, although today these performers are identified primarily with the Christian majority, the Amhara. Many songs of the *azmāriwoch* have survived through hundreds of years of oral transmission, and the performers pride themselves as repositories of local legends and history. In their long history these outspoken storytellers and “pundits” have been on the front line of political and cultural change, in some instances flourishing and in others brutally persecuted. Traditionally they have been regarded with both suspicion and respect in Ethiopian society. Despite being open to aspects of Ethiopian civil society, the *azmariwoch* have remained secluded and maintained strong ties with one another³⁰ (Betreyohannes, 2012, pp. 2–4).

Associations with *azmāri* are also at play with Ghermandi herself as the leader of “Tewodros.” The music of the project utilizes traditional Ethiopian instruments like the *wāshint* (flute), *masēnqo* (one-string fiddle with a triangular face), *krar* (a six-stringed lyre), and a small *kabaro* (drum), and utilizes the *tezetā* and *ambāsel*, song forms with unique scalar structures and expressive conventions.³¹ The *masēnqo* in particular is associated with the *azmāri* musician, to the degree that contemporary Ethiopians assume the instrument ensures their authenticity. For example, the contemporary Ethiopian singer-songwriter Ejigayehu Shibabaw (known as “Gigi”) distinguishes her own vocal style with the more authentic lineage of *azmāri* music making, once saying that “real” *azmāri* musicians both sing and play the *masēnqo*. She holds up a member of her group, Weres G. Egeziaber, as a genuine *azmāri* because he fits the traditional profile (Leymarie, 1997, pp. 48–49). In “Tewodros,” the Ethiopian *masēnqo* offers a special kind of symbology and serves as a site for cultural memory, in the way that the *jenbe* has in Mali or the *mbira* has in Zimbabwe (Polak, 2010; Turino, 2012). “Tewodros” features a highly accomplished *masēnqo* player, the Ethiopian musician Endris Hasan, who is a regular member of the resident band Ethiocolor in Addis Ababa and also a participant in the Nile Project, a collective of Nile citizens from 11 countries that make music to foster the sustainability of their shared physical and cultural ecosystem.³² Hasan’s presence in Ghermandi’s project is characteristic of his broader exploration of regional and intercultural identities, as well as diasporic perspectives (Nile Project Collective, 2014). In this

sense “Tewodros” presents Hasan as a modern-day *azmāri* who, like Ghermandi, engages local, regional, and global communities through music making.

Ghermandi’s “Tewodros” also expresses its historical roots through contemporary Ethiopian musical practices in more subtle ways. During the Italian occupation—the traumatic event that “Tewodros” explicitly rehistoricizes on Ethiopian terms—the *azmariwoch* and their newly formed performance spaces became rallying points for Ethiopian nationalistic sentiment. One association in particular, Yehager Fikir Mahiber (Love of the Motherland), had prominent artists and intellectuals as members, including the singers Tesema Eshete, Asefa Abate, Ketema Mekonnen, Ferede Golla, and Nigatuwa Kelkey³³ (Betreyohannes, 2012, p. 12). Ghermandi’s current promotion of the Ethiopian nationalist sentiment recalls the counterculture of the occupation. More poignantly, her determination to combine Ethiopian and Italian musicians into one project also recalls the practices of local music scenes in the 1930s, where Ethiopian *azmariwoch* and Italian musicians played together. Many Italians learned to play Ethiopian tunes. In one example, a violinist, Amerigo Del Yentura, used to perform the popular Ethiopian tune “Anchi Lij Ballila.”³⁴ Important encounters occurred in nightclubs owned by Italians, which later provided opportunities for young Ethiopians such as Tesfaye Gebre to develop new musical styles and dances³⁵ (Betreyohannes, 2008).

STORYTELLING, SINGING, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

LD: The question of whether “Tewodros” is intended to invigorate political consciousness, and to what degree, brings us to the heart of this book. Since her earliest short stories, rather than providing specific commentary on current events and by extension a potential prescription for change, Ghermandi’s songs explore the psychological prerequisites of change and their origins in the past. Courage and sacrifice often recur in her stories as highly valued qualities and assume precise focus in the descriptions of traditional songs of war. In *Queen of Flowers*, for example, the war songs serve as didactic tools, as forewarnings, and as evocations of the collective memory³⁶ (Ghermandi, 2011). In “Tewodros,” two fierce declarations of resistance take the form of the *shillēlā*, a song that praises, inspires, or memorializes military figures. These songs also act as rallying cries in battle³⁷ (Shelemay, 1994, p. 96). The first song, “Che Below,” functions as a synecdoche, where the symbolic name of a commander’s horse is endowed with both his patriarchal authority and an enduring quality of his character (in the case of the historical figure Atse Tewodros, “Abba Coster” [Father Serious]). Traditionally, warriors under his command would shout this name as they entered into battle martialing the resistance and posturing against the enemy. The lyrics for the second piece, “Tew Below,” are taken from a defiant song that was once used against the oncoming Italian army. Territorial struggles on the battlefield between Italians and Ethiopian patriots (*arbegnoch*) are passionately described and defended here: “show them the boundary line drawn by

our warriors,/how it is guarded by our bones,” with the refrain “tew below” like a rallying cry. Ghermandi’s early audience for these antifascist revival songs from the 1930s were the warriors themselves, some of whom in 2012 asked her to sing their songs so someone would remember what they had done for their homeland. The recordings for “Tewodros” were made in Addis Ababa. “Tew Below” recounts how when the Italian army entered with their machine guns and nerve gas bombs, the Ethiopian fighters “mowed them down into a springing mass like coffee beans roasting in a frying pan” (Artoni, 2013, p. 10).

EF: The degree to which Ghermandi’s storytelling promotes civic engagement is also dependent on her capacity as a diasporic author and musician to speak convincingly of conflict, courage, resistance, and sacrifice in the Horn of Africa within a globalized world. The relationship between storytelling and society is more strictly delineated in a European philosophical framework in Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay on the art of storytelling, where he claimed that storytelling is rooted in the ability to exchange experiences (Benjamin, 1969). All storytellers draw from experiences that are passed on orally, from mouth to mouth, and the best-written tales are the ones that differ least from the original oral account. As a result, Benjamin also argued that the novel is incompatible with storytelling because it “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it” (p. 87).

Compared to Benjamin’s position on storytelling, Ghermandi’s versatility is derived not only from her practice of performance and capacity to fashion experiences for her audience but also from her continued use of her novel and other writings as narrative sources. Ghermandi’s different conception of the novel’s potential is realized first in her choral novel *Queen of Flowers*, which encompasses a polyphony of voices offering stories that are originally oral first-person narratives. Mahlet is a curious listener before becoming the central storyteller in the novel. Even though print and performance are different in kind, Ghermandi’s artistic strategies demand that writing and performing operate in a dialogical relationship and result in a model that is more flexible than Benjamin’s.

In the performance of *Queen of Flowers*, her evocation of the people and places of Ethiopia through first-person storytelling in Italian and singing in Amharic (involving songs of her childhood) intertwines Italian voices that emerge off the pages of the novel. The storyteller and musician Gabin Dabirè from Burkina Faso is her artistic collaborator. Ghermandi changes from Western to African clothes at one point during the performance, thus reinforcing the audience’s experience of the sounds and languages dialogically presented on stage.³⁸ The passage from page to stage is often described as a powerful moment of connection with the audience, but Portelli (2008) has warned that it is imperative that Italian readers and listeners not approach this storytelling, in its written, oral, and musical modalities, as “postcolonialist exoticism” or simply “migrant literature.” Rather than traits of exotic cultures, music, voice, orality, and the ability to listen are everywhere an essential part of daily life, ways of shaping knowledge, expressions of a cultural and ultimately “political choice.”

LD: Here I want to pause and return briefly to the conceit of this volume: in particular, that as a general rule art cannot be necessarily divorced from civic

engagement and that it is necessary to critique this gulf, as well as consider examples that are contrary to that premise. In the introduction we highlighted the Western orientation of aesthetic discussions. Of all the value systems that we might propose in relation to Ghermandi's performances and their identification with Ethiopian sensibilities, a potential "intrinsic" or "aesthetic" quality is the least meaningful critically. An Enlightenment-derived "aesthetic" ideal simply does not exist in most African performance traditions, which move easily between different modalities and cultivate a permeable space between performer and audience.

As Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (2007) state in their magisterial collection on African literature, "if only the literary and critical tradition one is familiar with is the African, one could be forgiven for thinking that writers and critics of African literature invented the idea that literature has function, and that that function is to serve society" (p. 101). The idea that African art and artists are "critical prods and guides" for society is long-standing, originating in a precolonial context and then necessitated by colonial rule (p. 101). I do not mean to suggest that Ghermandi's performances are driven solely by an African nativist value system (Adéékó, 2007), but only that the overwhelming focus of her narrative attention and performance style renders the "question" of usefulness less relevant (see also Anyidoho, 2007).

EF: Ghermandi's work strengthens cultural and political consciousness to the extent that her audiences can: First, develop compassion in relation to her personal and collective stories; second, be educated about the destructive effects of Italian colonialism; and third, develop a sense of civic responsibility in Italy's unfolding present as a multiethnic society. The multilayered identities that Ghermandi embodies, recounts, and advocates interrogate the process of Italian nation building during fascist times, while also questioning the many forms of discrimination underlying the current reshaping of that national identity in a globalized world. The song "The Pride" (*Be kibir*) contained in "Tewodros" alludes indirectly to the thousands of young women who leave Ethiopia every year to do domestic work in the Arab countries (Artoni, 2013, p. 11). Reminiscent of Mamma Heaven's plea to dignity, the condition of uncertainty of these women conjures up a human sense of fragility, sacrifice, and courage associated with migrations worldwide: "to walk with head held high in/total freedom,/. . . how does one gain and how does/one lose that right/. . . what is its cost, what else can/replace it . . . why do we so love this migration/that strips us of respect?"³⁹ This also speaks to the waves of transnational migrations from Italy and the current influx of migrants into Italy, the gateway to Europe.

Issues of migration, subalternity, sacrifice, and dignity are not confined to the Italian experience. The breadth of Ghermandi's stories about hybrid diasporic identities reaches out to international audiences with equal communicative efficacy. Clò (2009) has written insightfully about the pedagogical dynamics of the artist's performances and lecture hosted by San Diego State University in 2007, which involved students of Italian, women's studies, and Africana studies, as well as the local community. Clò has underlined that Ghermandi's message

of “hope and strength . . . speaks to contemporary regional manifestations of imperialism,” and that the encounter of artist and audience in a public space “through mutual empathy and embodied behavior, creates knowledge differently from written texts and archives” (p. 147).

While the emotions that Ghermandi’s performances arouse cannot be relived as such, the concept of empathy is useful to highlight the social function of the relationship between the artist and her audience. Coplan (2011) has defined empathy as “a complex imaginative process,” simultaneously cognitive and affective, “in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation” (p. 5). Ghermandi captures the imagination of her audience in the sense that she is able to confront her listeners with conceptual problems such as conflict. Ghermandi’s storytelling promotes civic engagement by inviting the audience to develop something akin to what Goldie (2011) has termed “in-his-shoes perspective-shifting” (p. 302). This requires that the audience consciously shift its perspective to imagine what it would be like to be in the other’s circumstances.

Finally, regarding storytelling and activism, it is evident to me that Ghermandi has found in her own creative modulations of storytelling (writing, oral narratives, and singing) her site of active resistance to silenced private stories and public history. Her “flowers and pearls” are open-ended stories that she encourages her audience to continue passing on, mindful that “we are stories of stories in history” and thus have agency. On this point, her work rejoins Benjamin’s (1969) project, where “the storyteller . . . has counsel for his readers,” and where “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. . . . Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom” (pp. 86–87).

LD: This is an important point about empathy and I want to revisit a previous observation about embodiment in the performance of “Mamma Heaven.” Empathy is also the result of an experience of her performance practice techniques, particularly as vitality is generated from the “embodied locus” of the voice (Feld, Fox, Porcello, & Samuels, 2004, p. 341). We saw that central to Ghermandi’s poetics are expressivism, vocalism, and compelling musical affect that enhances the poetic rapport between performer and audience. Ghermandi has described the effects of this rapport as a form of intimacy, derived through what Coplan might term *simulation*. Specifically in the context of *Queen of Flowers*, Ghermandi explains that the intimacy generated between her and the audience negates any “potential divisiveness or empty debate.” Intimacy is the antidote to partisanship. She has also stated that this momentary condition of intimacy closes the gap of disbelief between people who have experienced the “abuses of those times” and those who have not, rendering the suffering undeniable to those present (G. Ghermandi, personal communication, September 23, 2014).

Ghermandi’s reliance on the persuasive power of sound to lower audience defenses—and to create a shared and intimate site of experience—recalls Barthes’s (1977) “materiality of the body,” what he called “the grain” of the voice,

which is delivered through the voice and affects the listener at the level of personal pleasure.⁴⁰ In the context of Ghermandi's performances, vulnerability is an ingredient of pleasure, and this allows her reading performances to simulate conflict, courage, resistance, and sacrifice for a receptive audience. However, rather than try to define this intimacy of performance as the result of an elaborate cultural hybridity, it may be more productive to consider the physical grain of Ghermandi's performances from the perspective of their ordinariness or as an artistic response to the psychological aspiration for connection in an everyday complex environment (Ramnarine, 2007, p. 7). In other words, these sites of empathy are also ordinary sites of creative production by Ghermandi and her collaborators; empathy is a natural outgrowth of Ghermandi's "body social." Alternatively, we could say that the materiality of Ghermandi's performance is also a social site (Feld et al., 2004, p. 341).

GHERMANDI'S "FEMALE PROJECT"

LD: Ghermandi has remained relatively silent on the politics of her life as a female author, musician, and performer, but her extensive exploration of female identities in her stories evidences a curiosity and admiration for their resilience (Kimberlin, 2000). Whether or not Ghermandi's silence represents a reticence on her part to be identified from a single axis of identity, the fact of her presence as a woman on the performance scene in Europe, Africa, and the United States places her within a community of diasporic women who seek their own relationship with the process of globalization (Hellier, 2013, p. 8; Salvaggio, 1999).

In her study of diasporic singers Wayna Wondwossen and Cabray Casay, Webster-Kogen (2013) draws connections between these artists who "draw poignant insights" into the diaspora experience and who, through the "meaning and potency of the convergence of private and national spheres in the discourse of female migrant musicians[,] . . . play a crucial role in constructing nationalist myths through repetition and performativity"⁴¹ (p. 185). Moreover, she observes a newfound diasporic freedom of movement as a result of new technologies, where strong cultural ties to home culture are also accompanied by an ambivalence to home and diaspora. In this context, Ethiopia is "no longer the exclusive focal point of songs, nor an object of longing, but the discursive focal point for a self-conscious and permanent diaspora"⁴² (Cohen, 2008, pp. 11–13). Of all the songs compiled in "Tewodros," "Hagere, bete" places Ghermandi's identity as an Ethiopian-Italian diasporic artist, and as a woman, into a rich confluence of simultaneous positions. Both the song text and its construction based on the *tezeta* major scale identify it within the musical-poetic traditions of the *tezeta* genre, one based on love and longing.⁴³ In her memoirs as a young anthropologist in Ethiopia during the revolution, Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1994) attests to the powerful agency of this nostalgic song when she tells of being able to bypass a dangerously testy gatekeeper by playing him a *tezeta* (pp. 165–166). Ghermandi's current engagement with the *tezeta* and its explicit allusions to her origins, as

in the lyrics to her song “Hagere, bete”—“I call you mama like a mother who gave birth to me/. . . Mama Ethiopia, you are my land, my home”—places her in a group of female contemporaries from Ethiopia that sing the *tezetā* abroad, engendering a conscious nostalgia for the archetypal home (Ghermandi, 2013).

EF: One of the most memorable figures in Ghermandi’s stories is Mamma Heaven. She embodies the liminal condition of the war exile for whom there is no place to be called home:

In Eritrea, they don’t let me in because my parents are Ethiopians; in Ethiopia, they don’t let me in because I was born in Eritrea. Here . . . ! Here you know what it is like. I am not considered like a human being with all its dignity. At best I can be humanly considered a *good maid*. I don’t have a place and I can only reach my land with my thoughts./I have felt pain. Too much pain to not have a place to call home so I have decided to leave and come here. I am sure that I will find a home now. I want to live in Ankober, the land of my ancestors. (Ghermandi, as cited in Ahad, 2006, p. 258)⁴⁴

Hospitalized for a surgery that is supposed to identify the cause of her rapid physical deterioration, Mamma Heaven knows that the roots of her poor health conditions are elsewhere, in the wars and lacerations that poison the lives of her people, all children of the same 3,000-year-old motherland. In this sense, her decision to die is a radical answer to the question of how it is possible to overcome forced relocations and reconnect to one’s land and ancestors. Feeling too old to fight again for her own dignity in a place that she does not belong to, Mamma Heaven embraces death as a refuge of hope, peace, and familiar presences. She does so with the serene, knowing smile of a woman who has offered all she had to defend that dignity. Her last message to the younger generation of diasporic subjects represented by Ghennet and Zellecke sums up her belief that “you must fight for your rights. Wherever in the world you find yourselves, do not forget to expect to be treated with the dignity due to every human being.” Mamma Heaven’s legacy of active resistance and self-respect is in tune with her personality, which is full of an “ancient vitality” that transpires not only from her love of dance (“the rhythm of drums charged her body with an irrepressible thrill”) and her support of old social traditions but also from her opposition to the “superficial modernity” of the Derg regime (Ahad, 2006, pp. 260–261).

In retracing the years of the regime, the story registers Mamma Heaven’s mistrust toward the Ethiopian government’s literacy campaign for everybody as a political strategy aimed at influencing the masses and eradicating old customs in the name of a European notion of progress. She eventually learns how to read, write, and, more importantly, use her signature to provide food and a safe shelter to the many children she looks after while their mothers are working and their fathers are involved in the civil war. As one of Mamma Heaven’s “children” recalls in the hospital: “This signature saved my life, many times.” And by the same token, that signature empowers Mamma Heaven to choose her destiny. Mamma Heaven and Grandma Berechti in “The Shadow” are only two among

many female protagonists⁴⁵ of Ghermandi's works that complicate and contest simplistic visions of African women as submissive and disempowered. Some of these women, such as Taytu Betul, wife of Emperor Menelek II, and the warrior Kebedech Seyoum, who fought carrying her newborn son on her back, are legendary female figures whom Ghermandi had researched for *Queen of Flowers* (Comberiati, 2011, pp. 154–155).⁴⁶

The intersection of gender and race occupies a crucial space in Ghermandi's investigation of personal and historical wounds. The Fascist law known as "Law on madamismo" (*legge sul madamismo*, 1937) banned relationships between male Italian settlers in East Africa and *madamas*, native women sometimes described as "comfort wives" (Iyob, 2005) on the assumption that sexual promiscuity between conquerors and colonized would compromise the superiority of the Italian race. With the enrollment of Italian men for the war in Ethiopia, the phenomenon of madamato and, consequently, that of "métissage" became more widespread. Ponzanesi (2012) has traced the phases of the condemnation of cohabitation with indigenous women: "from penalization in 1937, to the exclusion of any relationship as a violation of the prestige of the white race as expressed in 'La Carta sulla Razza' (1938), and to the abrogation of the legislation that allowed métis children to acquire Italian citizenship (1940)" (p. 161).⁴⁷

Ghermandi's mother was one of those métis children who never met her father as a result of the "legge sul madamismo." She grew up with the "myth of Italy" (Comberiati, 2011, p. 146) and tried to raise her own children as Italians. For Ghermandi, Italian colonialism has effectively disempowered African women by reducing them to serving Italian men. The women were often abandoned after giving birth. Furthermore, the men risked being jailed due to the implementation of the racial laws. Through the categories of gender and race, Ghermandi rewrites, along with other postcolonial citizens, the memory of the colonial archive. Furthermore, she urges a process of revision that she attributes predominantly to a "female project" (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012, p. 8), one articulated from the perspective of either the settler or the formerly colonized subject.

IN SUM

In their conclusion that storytelling acts as a "crucial vehicle for reawakening, disseminating, and sustaining social justice impulses," Solinger, Fox, and Irani (2008, p. 1) describe some common threads in their 23 case studies: first, that participants were aware of the reciprocal power between voices and audiences, and that this was a political act that overcame coercive silence and isolation, and second, that "experience and identity become mutable" (p. 6) in the act of storytelling. Not only does the voice undergo a transformative process, but also the story itself is received differently; it is compared, redrawn, and retold. This combination of making the invisible visible and its mutability facilitates the "re-making of the world." In this sense, a storyteller is an activist (p. 6).

In Ghermandi's songs and stories of passage and sacrifice, relationality emerges as a leitmotif. The relationality between the elements of her performances (from the written word to its oral realization, music, variations of voice and language, and physical presence) and her audience lies at the heart of her storytelling. Its overarching message is interdependent—"we are stories of stories in history"—and involves our web of acts upon history. Underlying Ghermandi's project is the assertion that the act of exploring the unpredictable connections between stories means we carry away part of that message as well. In fact, the practice of listening, redrawing, and retelling those stories allows us to overcome silence, and to interrogate our identities as individuals, as diasporic subjects with plural identities, and as citizens of one or more countries. The empathic relationship with the storyteller and singer is crucial to this process, one that is based on a space that throbs "with the same emotions" and is a shared space where lived experience is gifted. Empathy toward personal and collective sacrifice, courage, and hope is imperative to Ghermandi's rethinking of human relationships. This is a model of circular relationality. Her storytelling is rooted in the experience of passage and sacrifice of her Ethiopian-Eritrean-Italian family, an experience that is at once deeply personal and entrenched in the history of Italian colonialism in East Africa. In this model, the historical is personal; it is made public through storytelling and music, and it circularly refocuses on the subjective emotions of the audience, leaving room for a potential change of perspective on human history and its stories.

When asked about her stories and performance activity in relation to social empowerment, Ghermandi replied:

I have never thought of writing starting from a notion of social activism but rather as a form of rebellion toward a silence imposed onto historical events that involved me personally. The fact that this has aroused an interest that crossed over the personal to embrace a broader scope is a consequence; it wasn't the original purpose of my work. With my works I have always wanted to carve out a space for a part of myself that didn't have it. (personal communication, 2014)

What Ghermandi offers is music and storytelling as an expression of full-blooded first-person agency. In the quest to surmount the burden of historical silence, the individual voice draws on collective repertoires and stories, and reaches out to heterogeneous audiences. Infused with private memories, Ghermandi's performances craft a new, transitory, and "discursive" Ethiopia, generated between the new Horn of Africa and the new Italy.

NOTES

1. "Can one even think of this space as that between what experiencing beings can make and what they need?" Spivak, G. C. (2012a, p. 457).

2. In 1999, her short story "District Phone" ("Il telefono del quartiere") won first prize in the Eks & Tra literary competition for migrant writers. In 2003, she co-founded the online magazine *El Ghibli*, the first periodical publication in Italian dedicated to migration literature.
3. Popularly known as "the Derg," the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army (later renamed the Provisional Military Administrative Council) ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. The committee took power after the ousting of Emperor Haile Selassie I. In 1975, it embraced Communism, and was renamed the Ethiopian Workers Party (EWP) in 1987 by Mengistu Haile Mariam, who also renamed the country the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Republic in the same year. The Derg lost functional political power when Mengistu was overthrown in 1991 by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Movement (EPRDM). During its tenure, the Derg executed and imprisoned tens of thousands of its opponents without trial.
4. All translations are ours unless otherwise specified.
5. Italy declared Eritrea and Somalia colonies in 1890 and 1908, respectively. In 1936, Mussolini proclaimed the Italian Empire, and Eritrea and Somalia were united to Ethiopia as one colony under the name of Africa Orientale Italiana, or A.O.I. (Italian East Africa). This followed the unification of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania as Colonia di Libia (Colony of Libya). The colonial enterprise was an integral part of Italy's attempt to define itself as a modern nation in Europe. Angelo Del Boca (1992, 2003) and Nicola Labanca (2003) have argued that the scarcity of historiographical work on fascist colonialism (due also to inaccessibility to Italian colonial archives) is the result of a slow process of decolonization in republican Italy. For several decades, the myth of benign Italian colonialism has been sustained while repressive colonial politics and the shame of national defeats and losses have been systematically silenced, until in the 1980s the interrogation of national history started to become more pressing in light of African immigration to Italy. On the topic of Italian colonialism, see also Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (2005).
6. For more on Ghermandi's methods of recovering oral tradition and her relationship to her audience, see Brancato (2009). For an insightful analog regarding performance as a site of symbolic contact in the Atlantic world, see Roach (1996). Finally, Diana Taylor's (2003) classic study on embodied memory versus the written archive is a helpful lens on the dynamics of Ghermandi's transnational performance.
7. Eighteenth- and 19th-century chronicles from the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands often entertain themes of struggle, sacrifice, human frailties and human strengths, heroism, and betrayal.
8. This unpublished English translation of "The Shadow" is borrowed from Clò (2009, p. 141) and was provided by Gabriella Ghermandi. The original story, in Italian, is accessible through the artist's website: http://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/?qq=spettacoli:allombra_dei_rami_sfacciati_carichi_di_fiori_rosso_vermiglio
9. We return to this point later in the discussion on memory and tradition. Ghermandi has expressed that she didn't want to start her literary career with an autobiographical work. She states that even if she had wanted to, she could

not have done so because the past had left still-open wounds. In a personal communication (2014), she added that these wounds had only recently begun to heal. In general, we interpret her statements on this issue of “autobiography” as indicative of a desire to characterize her story as *one* of the *many* personal stories, thus retaining its singular empathetic tone but valuing its expression of common experience.

10. The term was first coined by the Ugandan critic Pio Zirimu in the context of East African culture and literature and later broadened by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o.
11. Ghermandi’s site includes recordings of the two short stories, in collaboration with Sorrentino.
12. Sorrentino plays multiple instruments, including acoustic and electric guitar, mandolin, and *chitarra battente*, a folk instrument in the lute family that originates from Calabria, Puglia, Basilicata, and Campania. In a statement on his teaching of the *chitarra battente*, Sorrentino declares that he uses field recordings and film to teach the repertoires of southern Italy.
13. “come la sabbia di Keren, *quella sabbia*” (Ghermandi, 2014b).
14. [print] Per il bene del popolo e per la sua crescita culturale. Viva il ‘governo del popolo.’ [performed] Per la crescita culturale del popolo [!]. Viva il governo del popolo [!] (Ghermandi, 2014b).
15. Translation by Azeb Aregawi and Felasfa Wodajo. “Ye debelo kedagi,” literally “torn from sheepskin,” implies something important. During his rule, Mengistu Haile Mariam used the same phrase on the radio to proudly announce who they had recently killed or jailed.
16. “un cuore unico, irripetibile [*sic*].”
17. See note 5.
18. On the various stages in the development of this literature, see Lombardi-Diop (2008) and Parati (1999, 2005).
19. *Postcolonial Italy* explores the “Italian postcolonial” by repositioning the legacy of Italian colonialism at the center of the debate on contemporary Italy, and by including emigration, Southern Question, and immigration as important phenomena to our understanding of the peculiar character of the Italian post-colonial condition. For example, in the essay “The Emigrant Post-‘Colonia’ in Contemporary Immigrant Italy,” Teresa Fiore (pp. 71–82) has addressed the issue of Italian colonialism and postcolonialism starting from the double use of the word *colonie*, which refers both to the Italian emigrant communities abroad and to the colonized territories from the time of Italy’s unification through the fascist period.
20. “Sono tanti anni in cui si cerca di sottolineare l’apporto culturale dei migranti in Italia. Purtroppo però ciò può avvenire nella misura in cui il paese è disposto a relazionarsi alla pari e non con la solita visione della subalternità. Finché si vorrà dare un’immagine di una certa Africa come si fa poi a spiegare alle persone che sì, l’Africa è un continente in cui si muore di fame, in cui muoiono bambini, ci ammazziamo come moscerini, non abbiamo scolarità etc... e poi dire che portiamo cultura! È difficile alimentare per decenni un’idea e poi aspettarsi che la gente sia anche disponibile a pensare il contrario.”
21. Crummey’s chapter argues that Tewodros’s personal leadership influenced his political successors, including Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam.

22. Marsden sets out to relate the story somewhere “between the cult of Tewodros and its bloodless destruction.”
23. Summarized by Abraham Negash (personal communication, December 2014).
24. The original Italian online version was in the form of a project proposal and contained a project description, objectives, plans for its completion and performance, a list of those responsible for its authorship, and biographies of its collaborative musicians and dancers. This quote is from the second version, a modified English translation, which accounts for the production of their first CD.
25. Because of her relatively light complexion, Ghermandi as an adolescent in Bologna was usually perceived as a Sicilian or Southern Italian. She states that she used writing to mark her difference vis-à-vis her classmates and teachers: “I wanted to make them understand that I had nothing to do with them” (as cited in Comberiati, 2011, p. 139). When Ghermandi moved to Bologna in the late 1970s, Italy was still grappling with emigration, return migration, and internal migrations. It was only with the 1981 General Census that Italy found itself as a “country of immigration,” but even then the knowledge of this migratory phenomenon remained limited to demographic studies (Pugliese, 2006, p. 72). Consequently, notions of hybrid ethnic and cultural identities were not part of public discourse and the school system.
26. Ghermandi has admitted that “With this music, playing on the stage, for the first time in my life I have been able to not reject my identities, the Ethiopian and the Italian. It is as if the world of my mother and that of my father had met there” (Artoni, 2013, p. 11).
27. Richard Reid (2006, p. 98) has observed that conflict is often at the heart of remembrance in the Horn of Africa, through written word and oral recollection, and the need to describe struggle and hardship plays a major role in “the process of self-definition that is nation-building,” and even “national destiny” in the case of Eritrea.
28. See http://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/?qq=spettacoli:allombra_dei_rami_sfacciati_carichi_di_fiori_rosso_vermiglio
29. Artoni (2013, p. 9, my translation).
30. The word *azmari* is derived from the Amharic infinitive *mezemer* (*mezmur*). According to Simeneh Betreyohannes, there have been three main theories of the origins of the *azmariwoch*: (a) as imported aspects of Asian and European traditions, (b) as “dropouts” from the traditional Ethiopian Orthodox Church education, or (c) as hereditary musicians, because of their higher concentrations in areas like the Gondor area in the north. Their abundance of musical activities in Gondor counters the dominant image of *azmariwoch* as musicians just found in local bars. In particular, Gondor *azmariwoch* share a self-designation based on genealogical ties. Recent studies have proposed that the crucial role that these musicians claim for themselves may not be entirely consistent with traditions of cultural practice, which do not always value their presence as much as they have proposed. See also Bolay (2004) and Kawase (2005).
31. In “Tewodros,” the musicians who play traditional Ethiopian instruments are as follows: Yohanes Afework (*wāshint*), Fasika Hailu (*krar*), Mesale Legese (*kabaro*), and Cesare Pastanella (*percussion*). Some types of songs are named after the

musical mode. For example, in the highlands, there are four main musical modes (*qeñet*): *tezetā*, *bāti*, *anchihoy*, and *ambāsel*.

32. Hasan also performs with Hager Fikir at Ethiopia's National Theater. He has performed and collaborated with Paal Nilssen-Love, the Ex, the Imperial Tiger Orchestra, and Trio Kazanchis, and has played on more than 600 recordings.
33. The association was short-lived and the Italian restrictions on *azmariwoch* were tightened, including their activities and censorship of their singing. There were heavy penalties for protest messages, and *azmariwoch* were executed if they did not comply, for fear of rallying ordinary citizens against their occupiers.
34. *Ballila* is a dialectal variation on *balilla*. *Balilla* referred to young members of the Fascist Party. Children were also called "*i piccoli balilla*."
35. Italian clubs from the time included the *Bela Popula*, *Villa Verdi*, and *La Mascotte*, some of which survived after the occupation ended in 1941. Cinemas were also established by the Italians in Addis Ababa and other regions, such as *Cinema Marconi* (later the *Haile Selassie I Theater*) and *Cinema Ras Hailu* (now the *Ras Theater*). They continued after 1941 (Betreyohannes, 2008, p. 43).
36. At the beginning of the book, Mahlet hears the *fukera* and remembers the heroic deeds of the three elders. Later, Aron the *azmari* sends a messenger to notify Daniel that he will teach him *fukera* and that *Haile Teklai* would participate in attacks against the military and Italian militia. Richard Reid has shown in his study of war, remembrance, and transmission in Ethiopia that the "battle" has a special place in Ethiopian historiography and the popular imagination. This emphasis on the military as a powerful historiographical force is uniquely Ethiopian, in a way that it is emphatically not for other parts of Africa. See also Reid (2006, pp. 90–91).
37. *Shillēlā* is the general term. Kebede notes that war songs differ through their function; the *fukerā* praises a great warrior, the *kerere* inspires warriors in battle, and the *fanno* memorializes a fallen warrior. See also Kebede (1971), Shelemay (1994, p. 28), and Shelemay and Kimberlin (2014).
38. For an in-depth discussion of Ghermandi's reading performances, see Alessandro Portelli's "Regina di fiori e di perle: Gabriella Ghermandi," originally published in the Italian newspaper *Il manifesto* (May 3, 2008), and accessible at <http://alessandroportelli.blogspot.com/2008/05/regina-di-fiori-e-di-perle-gabriella.html>
39. These lines are included in the booklet that accompanies the CD.
40. For issues of vocalty in a Western context, see Dunn & Jones, 1994.
41. This includes Wayna Wondwossen, a Washington, DC–based singer who moved to the United States from Ethiopia as a child, and Cabra Casay, an Israeli citizen who rose to prominence by singing (in Hebrew and Amharic) for the multiethnic Israeli hit band.
42. Cohen terms this a "mobilized" and "consolidated" diaspora.
43. The CD booklet for the "The Atse Tewodros Project" identifies the *Wollo* rhythm *sequota* used in this song. *Wollo* is a region in Northeast Ethiopia. For more on the Ethiopian scale system, see Abate (2009).
44. Emphasis in the original. Original text, in Italian, retrieved from Ali Mumin Ahad. A slightly different version is accessible at http://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/data/docs/mamma_heaven.pdf

45. Other female protagonists are Turunesh in "Quel certo temperamento focoso," Gennet in "Il telefono del quartiere," and the grandmother in "Il viaggio di nonna Hagosà."
46. See also Clò (2010).
47. On the topic of madamato, see also Barrera (2002) and Trento (2011).

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